

Historical memory of the Nazi period on Wikipedia in Italian

This is an input to the discussion provided by a Wikipedian who has been contributing articles related to history to Wikipedia in Italian for about twenty years.

It must be considered that there is not a single Wikipedia, but various encyclopedias written in more than 300 languages, whose development is formally independent; unfortunately too often the analysis carried out by scholars external to the encyclopedia is limited to studying the English-written version, which is the largest in size and generalize the conclusions drawn on the entire Wikipedia corpus. In reality, for each linguistic version, its writing depends above all on the geographical cultural area within which the reference language is most used, with significant differences if the language is mainly used in a single nation, or is shared in different states.

The case I am discussing is focussed on Wikipedia in Italian, having Italy as its cultural milieu, a country in which there is a discrete political dialectic around the historical memory of the fascist period and painful consequences, including anti-Semitism. This very same dialectic is strongly present on it. Wikipedia, its articles related to this time are often controversial and at the centre of revisionism, debates and conflicts.

An informal group has been formed several years ago as a task force aiming at improving and expanding content on the Wikimedia projects related to the Shoah, but also in supervising history articles to prevent them from being manipulated, as can happen on Wikipedia.

This happens by relying on and researching robust and authoritative sources for writing the articles and by discussing the topics during live events and edit-a-thon involving historians specialized in the study of these events and involving institutions devoted to historical studies and in keeping the historical memory alive.

The result of this activity was judged satisfactory by Marcello Pezzetti, one of the leading Italian scholars of the Shoah, who commented the work of the task force "I have the feeling, and I believe I am not mistaken, that today the control of the proposed material is carried out by groups of experts (for example, as regards contemporary history, in particular that of Nazism, I have met some cultured and capable "experts" who carry out scrupulous checks on a daily basis). The texts are definitely improved; some uncertainty remains in the proposal of the photographs. But I am convinced that the situation gets better and better as time goes on."

The involvement of the experts allows them to identify issues on Wikipedia articles and the task force is composed of Wikipedians with strong personal motivations to deepen their knowledge related to that period and to share it with the readers of the encyclopedia.

Edit wars with deniers have occurred; the writing and revising of the articles is always resolved by presenting sources that debunk the claims of the deniers. A peculiarity that we have inserted in the writing of some of these entries consists in reporting "speeches", "orders", "sentences from personal diaries" in which the biographed Nazi actually admits his participation, as in the article on Himmler, in which excerpts from his Posen speeches are included along with its original audio file.

We believe that it is also necessary to consider how the digital age has changed the terms of comparison between producers of texts and readers. We believe that the "prosumer" model, used in sociological studies of the modern market economy, must also be considered in this field. The Wikipedian who contributes to produce the encyclopedia is at the same time a user and a producer and this produces a bidirectional interaction, which is mediated in the collective writing of the articles, which are, at least in the main ones, the result of a work of discussing and comparing sources and opinions

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